

Against the Grain

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The Scholarly Publishing Scene — Eric Proskauer and His Cohorts

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Eric Proskauer was a prime example of Hitler's gifts to American scientific publishing, in sociologist and publisher **Irving Horowitz's** mordant formulation. Together with **Maurits Dekker**, **Eric** founded **Interscience Publishing** in 1940. (**Grune and Stratton** was founded in 1941, **Academic Press** in 1942.) The two men, then in their thirties, were both a complementary and an unlikely pair. Their relationship is well described in **Hendrick Edelman's** chapter, **Maurits Dekker and Eric Proskauer: A Synergy of Talent in Exile**, in the book, *Immigrant Publishers, The Impact of Expatriate Publishers in Britain and America in the 20th Century*, edited by **Richard Abel** and **Gordon Graham**, and first published by **Irving Horowitz's** firm, **Transaction Publishers**, in 2009. "**Mau**" **Dekker** had his Dutch connections, while **Eric Proskauer** retained his pre-war contacts with members of both the German and American scientific communities, so he, according to **Immigrant Publishers**, was considered the reserved scholar and his partner the enterprising extrovert. Years later, **Andy Neilly**, put the relationship this way: **Mau** was the money man, while **Eric** was the editorial guy, an ideal combination in a publishing company.

One of their first star authors was polymer chemist **Herman Mark**, who was also an expert in x-ray diffraction. Born to a Jewish father in Vienna in 1895, **Mark**, a professor of physical chemistry at the **University of Vienna**, was in trouble after **Hitler's** annexation of Austria. In 1938, he and his family made a daring escape across the Swiss border; eventually, he would land at **Brooklyn Poly**, where he developed the **Polymer Research Institute** in 1946.

The **Interscience/Mark** relationship started with books. But in 1945 a periodical called the *Polymer Bulletin* was founded. The following year, it evolved into the *Journal of Polymer Science*, which remains a powerhouse to this day. In 1947 two other **Brooklyn Poly** professors, chemist **Raymond Kirk** and chemical engineer **Donald Othmer**, worked with **Interscience** on the first volumes of the *Encyclopedia of Chemical Technology*. **Kirk-Othmer**, as it became known, is another powerhouse. (**Othmer** is credited with more than 150 U.S. patents, but much of the \$750 million fortune he accumulated during his long life was due to the \$25,000 he and his second wife invested in a **Warren Buffet** partnership in the early sixties. Thanks to Wikipedia for this tidbit.)

Eric Proskauer and **Mau Dekker** remained close for some time. They even

had adjoining homes at a lake in Peekskill, a town north of New York City. But as the men reached their late fifties and early sixties, their relationship had become frayed, due, as **Edelman** explains, to personality, stylistic, and cultural differences. When **Interscience** merged with **Wiley** in early 1962, there was a permanent rupture between the two men. **Proskauer** joined **Wiley**, becoming senior vice-president, while **Dekker** joined his son's eponymous company, **Marcel Dekker** (now part of **Taylor & Francis**), as chairman and editor-in-chief. They both thrived, it would seem. At his seventieth birthday party in 1973, **Eric Proskauer** joked that he had started his career by bringing German chemistry to the U.S. and finished it by bringing American chemistry to German universities.

I didn't know about **Eric** or about pre-1962 **Interscience** when I published an engineering monograph with **Wiley-Interscience** in 1968 nor when I became an acquisitions editor for professional-level mechanical and industrial engineering books in 1976. But over time, the power of the chemistry books and journals that **Interscience** had brought to the merger with **Wiley** became evident to me, although I didn't realize until much later that it was the **Interscience** people's knowledge of international marketing and sales that made **Wiley** so much stronger than it had been pre-merger.

I did get to know **Eric** when he was in his eighties and I was then running **Wiley's** scientific and technical publishing. Every so often we would get together for lunch at the **Chemists' Club**, which was then in a gray fortress-like building, designed in the early 1900s by architects **York and Sawyer**, at 52 East 41st Street in Manhattan, a short walk from **Wiley's** offices, which were then on Third Avenue and 40th Street. **Eric** always ordered what he called the chopped steak. His judgments were always delivered with a grin. His explanation of the difference between a pile of books and a pile of journals was memorable. Here's the gist of it: a pile of books sits quietly, not demanding that you get to them right away. Take your time with us, they say. Journals are a different story. When you

get a new issue, you immediately think, Have I read the issue that's been sitting in a pile for one month or three months, etc? And if the issues begin to accumulate without having been read, I'll feel more and more guilty.

All of these men led full and long lives. **Eric Proskauer** and **Herman Mark** both died in 1992, aged 89 and 97. **Mau Dekker** and **Don Othmer** both died in 1995 at the ages of 96 and 91. At the time of their deaths, you

could put the full text of journals online, but online access to journals was nothing like it is now. And while there were many complaints in those days from many quarters about journal prices and journal publishers' profits, publishers' adversaries didn't have today's wherewithal to attempt to disrupt journal publishers' business models and other aspects of their operations.

The publishing environment these men operated in — as publishers, editors, and authors — was of course very different from the one that exists today. In pre-online days, major universities and other organizations with sprawling campuses and facilities would have had to buy more than one copy of a major work, like **Kirk-Othmer**. It's just not the way things are anymore. Pre-online, of course, there was no Wikipedia or other information sources that readers consider adequate substitutes for reference works that carry publishers' imprimaturs, once universally considered guarantees of credibility and accuracy. And then there are journals. After World War II, publishers, like **Interscience**, **Robert Maxwell**, and **Elsevier**, started core journals in major fields, like polymer science. Then came the research explosion that led to the journal paper explosion and to the expansion of numbers of pages in core and other journals, which were accompanied by rising prices per title and strains on library budgets, eventually considered by university administrators cost centers, whose budgets had to be restrained. For a time, the only way you could steal a journal paper was by photocopying it, which was attacked successfully by publishers. The Internet changed everything, of course, including the perception among so many researchers and others of how much value publishers really add to journal publishing. While **Eric Proskauer** and his cohorts were alive, there was moralizing about journal publishers' profits, but there was no moralistic **Alexandra Elbakyan**, who managed to develop and popularize **SCI-HUB**. Back in the quaint pre-Internet days, when publishers considered themselves gatekeepers, did anyone even dream of an author pays, open access business model for journal publishing, even a successful one like **PLOS** (although **PLOS** is taking some financial hits, according to reports I've seen). And then there is European research funding agencies' **Plan S**, which has more than a whiff of authoritarianism. How would **Eric Proskauer** and his cohorts have reacted to these threats to the independence of researchers and to the business model under which they thrived and provided valuable knowledge and information to readers? Would they have fought these threats or would they have found ways to accommodate their work to them? I wonder how these men would have reacted to this environment. I wish we still had their guidance. 🌿

